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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to determine the relationship between college women's attitudes toward obesity and their own body weight. Subjects were placed in three categories: (1) acceptable level of body fat, (2) overweight, and (3) obese. Correlational techniques were used to determine the relationship between the subjects percent of body fat and their attitudes toward obesity (personal and social acceptance). A significant positive relationship between percent of body fat and social acceptance was revealed; the higher the subject's level of body fat, the more socially accepting they were of the obese person. However, only the obese group displayed a positive social acceptance of the obese individual. None of the three groups desired an obese mate. (JD)

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College Women's Attitudes Toward Obesity

by

Jim R. Chambless, Ed.D.
Coordinator of Graduate Studies
Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation,
University of Mississippi,
University, Mississippi

and

Eugene R. Anderson, Ed.D.
Instructor, Department of Health, Physical Education
and Recreation
University of Mississippi,
University, Mississippi

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EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
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Much of how an individual perceives himself is determined by reciprocal feedback from others. Acceptance or rejection by others become integral components of an individual's self-concept. Constant insult to a person's physical personality may result in a wide gap between body structure and the desired and socially acceptable image. (1:86) Such discrepancies may result in the obese person feeling inadequate, restricting their social contacts, or resorting to one of a variety of other forms of adjustment. (2:112)

The obese feel anguish and self-contempt for which society is deemed responsible. Fat children grow up deprived of approval, success, smiles they should have won, and honors they deserved. Twenty extra pounds make the world step back in distaste from the ugly child in front of it. Each step the world takes backward means another hamburger and bag of French Fries to ease the pain of being unloved. (4:22) Monello has reported that overweight adolescent girls show personality characteristics similar to the traits of ethnic and social minorities, due to their status as victims of prejudice and injustices. The resultant traits have been assumed as being causes rather than effects of obesity. (3:35)

Our social climate praises slenderness, especially in women, to such a great extent that it is amazing not all individuals suffer from disgust and self-hatred for being fat. (1:99) Since society imposes value judgements on individuals based on body appearance which may result in the development of personality traits, it is not difficult to understand the importance of a study on attitudes towards obesity.

The authors headed a research team at the University of Mississippi to determine the relationship between mid-south college womens attitudes toward obesity and their level of obesity (% of body fat). Three hundred and twenty-seven college women ranging in age from 18 to 21 from four major mid-south universities were proportionately, randomly selected to insure representativeness of the sample for the project. The women's attitudes toward

obesity were measured by means of a Revision of the Bray Attitude Inventory Scale. (5:106-113) The revised instrument contained two subscales: (1) personal acceptance and (2) social acceptance of the obese person. The personal acceptance subscale revealed whether the female would accept or reject the obese person in a social setting.

The subjects per cent of body fat was determined after the attitude inventory had been administered. Two variables, sub-scapula skinfold measurement and pounds in body weight, were used to determine per cent of body fat estimations. Calculations were made based on Wilmore's formulas. (6:2) The subjects were placed in three discrete categories for the purpose of analyzation. The categories were as follows:

(1) Acceptable level of body fat (below 25%)

(2) Overweight (25 - 27.99%)

and (3) Obese (28% and above)

The subjects in the acceptable weight category re-affirmed current assumptions regarding an overweight society. Only 37.91% of the subjects had acceptable levels of body fat while 62.09% were either over-weight or obese. (7:602)

Correlational techniques were used to determine the relationship between the subjects per cent of body fat and their attitudes toward obesity (personal and social acceptance). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. The responses of the total group revealed a significant positive relationship between per cent of body fat and social acceptance. In essence, the higher the subject's level of body fat, the more socially accepting they were of the obese person.

When the three categories (acceptable, overweight, and obese) were analyzed the source of the acceptance was revealed. Significant positive relationships(correlation) were obtained on personal and social acceptance of the obese group. No significant relationships (correlation) were revealed in the overweight or acceptable groups and the acceptable weight group exhibited a negative but non-significant relationship (correlation).

Further analyzation of the data using Analyses of Variance Techniques revealed a significant difference among the three categories in regard to personal and social acceptance of the obese person. These are presented in Table 2.

Only the obese group displayed a positive social acceptance of the obese individual. When the data was subjected to analysis of variance a significant difference among groups was found which was beyond the 0.05 level. A posteriori test of the means revealed that the obese group's attitudes toward obesity were significantly different from both the overweight and acceptable weight group. There was no significant difference between the overweight and the acceptable weight groups' attitudes toward social acceptance of the obese person.

While all subjects had negative responses or non-acceptance of the obese person on a personal basis, the obese group had the highest level of acceptance of the obese person on a personal basis. A significant difference was present between the obese group ($\bar{X}$ = 29.0568) and the overweight and the acceptable weight groups. No significant difference was present between the acceptable weight and the overweight group in regard to personal acceptance of the obese person.

The results of this project have important ramification when we consider that an attitude is a relatively lasting evaluation toward some object or experience. (8:96) Attitudes are learned and acquired in much the same manner that other internal activity is acquired. (9:44) In a child, the development of attitudes first starts in the form of conditioned postural responses and dispositions to modify the stimulus world. A child builds a world of negative and positive orientation. (10:279)

Along with direction, attitudes have another property. An attitude has a degree of intensity or feeling. Attitudes can range from an extremely favorable degree to an extremely unfavorable degree of feeling for an object. (11:48-49) The results of the research project by the authors indicates the definitive direction and a feeling of less than intense attitudes. College women did not reflect intense attitudes toward obesity but they definitely presented directional views.

Only the obese group was socially accepting of the obese population. This very well could be through empathy and self-identification. The overweight group expressed the most disapproval of obese people. Perhaps this is due to their being more weight conscious because of prior parental and peer group experiences.

None of the three groups desired an obese mate. However, the overweight group again demonstrated the greatest intensity of objection to an obese mate. Again as in social acceptance prior experiences was hypothesized as the causal factors.

Important ramifications are evident from the results of the study. The obese male is definitely not viewed in a positive manner as a prospective mate by college women. Only obese college women appear to grant social acceptance to members of the obese population. Non-obese college women have negative attitudes toward our obese population which certainly are reflected by their avoidance of these people in social settings. Indeed the obese person is a lingering survivor in a hostile environment.

TABLE 1
Correlations Between % Body Fat
and Attitude Toward Obesity

Body Fat	Social Acceptance	Personal Acceptance
	r	r
Total Group N=327	*0.304	0.191
Obese - (above 28%) N=88	*0.725	*0.460
Overweight (25 - 27.99%) N=115	0.076	0.117
Acceptable (Below 25%) N=124	-0.069	-0.040

* r - significant beyond the 0.05 level

Results of Anova and Duncan's Multiple Range Test

Social Acceptance Means

	Acceptable ($\bar{x}$=101.05)	Overweight ($\bar{x}$=99.90)	Obese ($\bar{x}$=115.73)
Acceptable Weight ($\bar{x}$ = 101.05)	X	1.15	14.68*
Overweight ($\bar{x}$ = 99.90)	1.15	X	15.77*
Obese ($\bar{x}$ = 115.73)	14.68*	15.77*	X

Personal Acceptance Means

	Acceptable ($\bar{x}$ = 27.23)	Overweight ($\bar{x}$ = 26.43)	Obese ($\bar{x}$ = 29.05)
Acceptable Weight ($\bar{x}$ = 27.23)	X	0.80	1.72*
Overweight ($\bar{x}$ = 26.43)	0.80	X	2.52*
Obese ($\bar{x}$ = 29.05)	1.72*	2.52*	X

* indicates that the differences between the means intersecting in the matrix are significant beyond the 0.05 level.

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